



Message: *He Told Me I Could Come* | March 15, 2026 | Speaker: Bob Koestler

Good morning and welcome. I am so glad you were able to and made the choice to spend some time today, with us, in God's word. My name is Bob Koestler and I am again honored to be bringing you the message this morning called "HE TOLD ME". We will be looking at another doozy of a question asked by Christians and non-Christians alike and learn how this question can and should be answered and the reasons "why".

***ON-SCREEN - Picture of Calvary and the three men on the three crosses

Let's pray and then we'll get started.

Heavenly Father, open our hearts today to the astonishing grace of Your Son. Help us understand your message to us through this simple, profound interaction between a dying thief and the Savior who hung on a cross beside him as we approach that day we now call "Good Friday". May we leave here knowing the one and only answer to the question, "How do I get to heaven?" In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I encourage you to look at the picture on the screen. This is a picture of how the three crosses may have been placed with a thief on each side of the cross Jesus would be crucified upon. Close enough to ridicule. Close enough to challenge. Close enough to ask important questions. And close enough to hear the best response anyone could ever hear.

The Scripture Reading for today comes from [Luke 23:39-43 \(NLT\)](#)

"39 One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself – and us, too, while you're at it! 40 But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? 41 We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Leader: This is the word of God for the people of God. Response: Thanks be to God.

Imagine for a moment one of the most important questions anyone will ever ask: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Or, if you're already a believer, the question that may echo in some of your quiet moments: How do I get to heaven?

#1 On WHAT BASIS will I be ALLOWED to stand before God?

People give all kinds of answers to that question. And I've actually heard some of these answers...from people I've just met...to friends... and even family members. Answers like

- "If I'm a good person, that will get me there, right?"
- "I've gone to church most of my life."
- "I've given to charity, raised good kids, never hurt anyone...on purpose."
- "I've kept the 10 commandments as best I could."

Those are honest answers. But scripture says they are the wrong answers to that question. **WHY** are these all wrong answers? Because the Bible's answer is radically different.

If you were to die tonight and you were getting entry into heaven, what would you say? If your answer is in the first person such as "because I...because I believed...because I have faith...because I did this..." those would all be wrong answers. It's not about what **YOU** did. The only right way to answer that question is in the third person such as "because **He**...because of

what He did..." **IT'S ABOUT WHAT HE DID.** One of the clearest pictures of that truth is found in the conversation between two criminals and Jesus, the Christ.

#2 Today. With Jesus Himself.

Picture what was happening. It's Calvary. Three crosses. We call it Good Friday. On the left and right, two thieves - two bad guys - guilty men, condemned men, bad men, men who probably deserved their punishment. In the center is Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, who had done nothing wrong.

The first thief mocks Him, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" This guy is angry, bitter, still trying to bargain and still thinking salvation is about power or escape.

But the second thief is different. Something has happened in his heart. In his final hours, while hanging there with nails in his hands and feet. His shoulders are probably out of their sockets due to the weight of his body pulling his torso away from his arms. He is helpless...but scripture records that he sees clearly for the first time.

He rebukes the other thief, "Don't you fear God? We're getting what we deserve. But this man - meaning Jesus - he's done nothing wrong."

Then, turning to Jesus, he says the simplest, most honest prayer in the Bible: "Jesus, **REMEMBER ME** when you come into your kingdom."

That's it??? Yep - that's it. No list of good works to negotiate with. No promise to do better. No religious ritual he could perform. After all, his hands were nailed and his time was almost gone. Just a simple plea of, "**Remember me.**"

And then Jesus answers with words that shatter every human idea of earning salvation (*now listen to this closely*), "Truly, I say to you, **TODAY** you will be **WITH ME** in **PARADISE.**" **TODAY**, Jesus says. Not after purgatory. Not after a bunch of suffering. But Today.

And **WITH ME.** Not in some distant place but *with Jesus Himself.*

And with me today, WHERE? In Paradise. Eternal joy in the presence of God. Wow...

How did that thief get to heaven? He had nothing to offer. He hadn't been baptized, he hadn't attended Growth Groups, and he'd probably never taken communion. He'd done many bad things in his life. He was a criminal dying in shame.

How did that thief get to heaven? He got to heaven the same way anyone can. The same way you are invited to get there. It's in what Jesus did on the cross that day and when He rose three days later. I contend that that's the gospel in one sentence.

#3 He Said So

Our youngest son, Logan, recently attended a Christian youth conference held in Wisconsin Dells. If anyone has ever stayed at one of those waterparks, they can have really big rooms for you to stay in. One of the things Logan's group of people from Fennimore would do is to meet in one of the rooms and talk about things such as their faith and things relevant to it. They shared testimonies, asked questions, and shared their faith. One evening, Logan was getting to the group a little late because he had stopped off in the Worship room and sang a few songs...surprise, surprise. When he finally arrived, he said he looked around and there was a woman in the room that he didn't know, which was strange because everyone there had been someone he knew. He looked over at another guy there with a quizzical look and a "who is she-how did she get here" whisper but only got a quizzical look in return. Was she supposed to be there or not? Had someone invited her?

Let me tell you a story that brings this home. Many preachers have painted this picture beautifully but I'm going to borrow a version from a man named Alistair Begg.

So let's move past the image of the three men on the cross to the check-in counter just outside heaven. Imagine that this second thief arrives at the gates of heaven - bloody, broken, still reeking of everything that just happened at the cross that day. An angel at the gate greets the thief and asks, "Who are you? Why are you here? What right do you have to enter? It says here you've never been in a Bible study. Hmm...You never got baptized. And You don't know a thing about what a church service looks like...wow...and yet.....YOU MADE IT! YOU MADE IT! But HOW did you make it?"

Thief – "Well, I guess I don't know."

Angel – "What do you mean you don't know?"

Thief – "Well.....because I don't know."

Angel – "Again, what did you.....hmmm, just a second, let me get my supervisor."

Angel Supervisor comes out – "We've got just a few questions for you. First of all, are you clear on the doctrine of justification of faith?"

Thief – "I've never heard of that in my life."

Angel Supervisor – "Ah huh - And what about...let's just go to the justification of scripture?" Staring at the thief eventually, in frustration, the angel supervisor says, "ON WHAT BASIS ARE YOU HERE?"

And the thief finally says, (*whispered statement*)

"THE MAN ON THE MIDDLE CROSS SAID I CAN COME."

Angel Supervisor: What?

"THE MAN ON THE MIDDLE CROSS SAID I CAN COME."

pause

You see, The thief doesn't start listing accomplishments and saying I did this or I did that. He doesn't say, "Well, I reformed in my last hours." He simply points back to what just happened on Calvary and says,

"The man on the middle cross said I can come."

You see, that's the **ONLY** answer. That's all the thief needs. That's all **YOU** need. If you take your eyes off the cross, you can only give truth of the cross lip service, while at the same time living as if your salvation depends on **you**.

Because if the question is "What do I need to do to get to heaven?" the answer is not "Do more." The answer is "Believe in the One who did it all." Because our Savior died and rose again, my sinful self is set free.

#4 Salvation is POSSIBLE and CERTAIN

Jesus didn't just make salvation *POSSIBLE*. He made it **CERTAIN** for everyone who trusts and believes in Him.

Look again at what the thief did and take it to heart:

1. He acknowledged his guilt when he said, "We deserve to die for our crimes."
2. He acknowledged Jesus' innocence when he said, "This man has done nothing wrong."
3. He acknowledged Jesus' kingship when he said to Jesus, "When you come into your kingdom."
4. He asked for mercy when he asked, "Remember me."

That's faith. Not perfect theology. Not a lifetime of good works. Just turning to Jesus and saying, "Lord, I'm a sinner. You are my Savior. Remember me."

And Jesus said "YES".

On a personal note. Earlier in my life, I wondered and would become upset when someone I knew wasn't a good person was said to have "found Jesus" on their death bed. How could this be? How could this person live a bad life and in one prayer, be saved? That's too easy!Then this story of the thief on the cross was explained to me and it opened my eyes to the fact it wasn't about what these people had done or even what they hadn't done. It was only about what HE HAD DONE. I now understand I am being asked to do good and generous things because of what HE did for me FIRST. Not because it earns me anything but because it HONORS the one who is my Savior.

You see, Jesus said YES that day because the one thief *did* repent. He turned from mocking to defending Jesus. He confessed his sin. He understood salvation wasn't based on his performance - it was based on Jesus' finished work.

Jesus' words in **John 19:30 "It is finished"** were spoken just shortly after His promise to the thief. Overall, the Hebrew word **teh-TEH-les-tie** is the single, most powerful word Jesus spoke as His final words on the cross. **You see, Tetelestia** is Jesus' cry of victory, not defeat: the mission is accomplished, salvation is secured eternally for those who believe, and God's wrath against sin is satisfied. It's one word that echoes through eternity as "Done!" in the most profound way.

The debt was paid. The way was open. His work on earth was accomplished.

So what does this mean for us?

If you're here today and you've never trusted Christ, please understand the question isn't "Am I good enough?" You need to answer the question of "Will I trust the man on the middle cross who said I could come? Do I believe He died for ME?" You don't have to "clean up your life" first. He asks that you come as you are - guilty, broken, empty-handed - and simply say, "Jesus, you are my savior, I am sorry. Please, remember me."

If you're a believer, this story reminds you every day that your standing in heaven is not based on your performance. It's based on His promise and His resurrection.

When the evil one whispers, "Look at your failures. Look at your hypocrisy. You don't deserve to be there," you can answer, "You are so right. I know I don't deserve to be there. But the man on the middle cross said I can come and there's a place for me."

So the answer to "How do I get to heaven?" is simple, glorious, and free, because Jesus, the man on the middle cross, made a way for you through his death and resurrection.

He died for our sins. He rose again. And to every believing heart, He says even now, "Today - you can be with me in paradise."

So if you've never done it, do it today. Pray something like this in your heart: "Jesus, I'm a sinner. I deserve judgment. You died for me. You rose for me. Remember me. Save me. I trust You alone." And if you pray that prayer, the man on the middle cross has promised, "You can come."

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, thank You for the middle cross. Thank You for the thief who shows us that it's never too late. Thank You that salvation is not based on what we do, but 100% on what You've done. For every person here wondering how to get to heaven, may they hear Your voice today saying: "You are welcome here. Believe in me. Come sit next to me. I saved a seat for you." And may we all live in the joy of knowing - it was you, who on the middle cross, said we could come. In your precious name, AMEN.

Next Steps:

- I will read Luke 23 in preparation for Good Friday
- I will read Isaiah 53 as a prophecy of Jesus' atoning death (700-750 years before Jesus' death)
- I will read through the Lenten Reading List this Lenten season